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REASON'S RAPPORT: PASCALIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE PERSUASIVENESS OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

William D. Wood

The widespread rejection of natural theology presents a serious problem for its adherents. In dialogue with Pascal, I explain why natural theology so often fails to persuade and suggest some ways in which it can become more persuasive. I argue that persuasiveness is a function of attractiveness and that attractiveness is a function of our *rapport* with a given attractive thing. Natural theology thus ought to show people that they share rapport with God. In order to do this, however, it must become more imaginative, since we are strongly attracted to the products of our own imagination. I commend both Pascal's use of the form of the fragment and his artful rhetoric in the wager fragment, which I read as a fine example of imaginative natural theology.

Natural theology is perhaps unique among methods of inquiry in that its most determined opponents are frequently found among those most committed to the truth of its conclusions. It is no surprise that avowed atheists scorn arguments that purport to demonstrate the existence of God. More interesting, however, are those committed Christian theists who also reject the project of natural theology.¹ Their number is legion. Indeed, it seems to be the case that not only are most opponents of natural theology theists, but also that most theists are opponents of natural theology. Theists oppose natural theology for a variety of reasons. Speaking very roughly, we may isolate three fronts of opposition. These three positions are logically distinct but mutually supportive, so it is not uncommon that a single theist (Karl Barth, for instance) affirms all three.

First, some theists argue that natural theology is *conceptually incoherent*. They thereby agree with religious skeptics that there can be no successful arguments, or complex of arguments, that prove that God exists. Such theists do not find this state-of-affairs troubling, however, because they believe that God's "existence" is of a sort that transcends logical or empirical demonstration. Second, other theists argue that the real problem with natural theology is that it is *idolatrous*. Such theists assert that knowledge of God comes only as a result of the free and sovereign revelation of God. On this account, any attempt to use human reason to compel God to reveal Godself is not just incoherent but positively sinful. Finally, a third group of theists claims that natural theology is, in point of fact, *useless*, irrespective of the previous two considerations. They ask: who are the arguments of natural theology for? Theists, being theists, won't need them. Atheists



simply won't find them convincing. To these opponents, the whole business of natural theology seems like a species of intellectual vanity that is best avoided.

On both philosophical and theological grounds, the first two of these positions seem quite wrong to me, but I will not argue against them here. Instead, I will simply assume that the project of natural theology broadly construed – the project of using unaided human reason to demonstrate the existence of God – is neither incoherent nor idolatrous.² Even after this sizable assumption, however, the third objection to natural theology still seems to have real force. Has anyone ever become convinced of God's existence after mastering, say, Richard Swinburne's inductive arguments in favor of its Bayesian probability? Or after pondering the subtleties of the modal variant of the ontological argument? It is not unfair to say that natural theology seems spectacularly ill-equipped to carry out its own task, if part of that task is actually convincing people to believe in God.

One figure who thought a great deal about the proper relationship of Christian faith and natural theology is Blaise Pascal. Pascal is frequently regarded as an opponent of natural theology and, indeed, we can easily find among his *Pensées* fragments that suggest that he would endorse all three of the theistic objections outlined above. Pascal's exact position on natural theology is difficult to determine, in part because of the very fragmentary character of the *Pensées*, and so it has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly attention. The dominant strain of scholarship claims that Pascal's religious fideism and epistemological anti-foundationalism lead him to reject any kind of natural theology. Other scholars, however, point to the role that evidential arguments and proofs play in the *Pensées* and argue that Pascal's rejection of natural theology is not as uncompromising as it first appears.³ For the most part, both groups of scholars seek to determine whether Pascal believes that natural theology is possible, on either philosophical or religious grounds. In other words, they focus on Pascal's treatment of what I am calling the first and second theistic objections to natural theology. They say comparatively little about the third objection, even though Pascal himself devotes a great deal of attention to it.

In this paper I first argue that the fact that natural theology is widely rejected poses a serious problem for its adherents, committed as they are to the truth of its conclusions. I next suggest that in order to understand this widespread rejection, we should look first for an account of what makes things in general seem attractive. I argue, in dialogue with Pascal, that attractiveness is a function of our *rapport* with particular attractive things and that we do not find belief in God attractive because we seem to share no *rapport* with God. I further argue that it is the power of the imagination that makes things seem attractive and that we use our imaginations to create a beguiling but false self that seems to share no *rapport* with God. Thus, if natural theology would become more convincing, it must first seek to persuade people that they can (and do) share *rapport* with God. In order to do this, however, natural theology must itself become more imaginative and must pay greater attention to its literary and rhetorical form. I conclude by commending the form of the fragment as an appropriate form for natural theology and by offering a reading of Pascal's famous wager

fragment that highlights its attentiveness to the dynamics of rapport. Although I look to Pascal for inspiration at every turn, I must emphasize at the outset that mine is a constructive rather than a historical-exegetical interpretation of his thought. As a result, I draw from Pascal freely, completely neglecting some central elements of the *Pensées* (the heart and the three orders, for example) and elevating other seemingly obscure elements (especially the idea of rapport) to central importance.

I.

In this section, I argue that we Christians who believe that natural theology is a worthwhile endeavor face a special dilemma. By virtue of our belief in its worthiness, we must affirm either (1) that sound arguments concluding that God exists have already been discovered or (2) that, although they have not yet been discovered, such arguments are available in principle.⁴ In the first case we must ask ourselves why these supposedly sound arguments command such small respect from the community best equipped to evaluate them, philosophers and theologians. (We must also admit that the arguments of natural theology rarely lead laypeople to believe in God either.) The second case is trickier – certainly, we shouldn't rule out the discovery of some knock-down argument that silences all skeptics – but, apart from such an über-argument, it seems fair to say that the future will look much like the present, which is to say that future work in natural theology will be widely regarded as suspect and unconvincing. Hence our dilemma: even when natural theology succeeds, it fails—because we cannot convince anyone of its success.

Note that I do not *conflate* an argument's soundness with its persuasiveness. I do not claim that all persuasive arguments are sound or that all sound arguments are persuasive. Neither do I conflate an argument's persuasiveness to experts with its persuasiveness to laypeople, nor suggest that the absence of the latter devalues the former. Nevertheless, it seems intuitively plausible that, at a minimum, a sound argument offered in good faith ought to be convincing to a large subset of those who are equipped to understand it. Yet such does not seem to be the case with natural theology.

Of course, philosophers thoroughly disagree about basic questions of ontology, epistemology, etc., so perhaps we should not expect widespread agreement about the conclusions of natural theology. I suggest, however, that this line of defense is not really open to the Christian natural theologian. Technical philosophical positions about ontology, epistemology or whatnot are abstruse and widespread disagreement about them is just what we would expect. But the Christian natural theologian cannot legitimately group arguments about the existence of God with these other technical disputes. For the Christian natural theologian (qua Christian) maintains that every human being was created by God and for God, and that every heart is restless until it rests in God. He should therefore expect that arguments about the existence of God would be more persuasive, not less persuasive, than other philosophical arguments. Our hearts aren't restless until they determine whether justified true belief really is knowledge, after all. If anything, the natural theologian ought to expect that philosophers

(indeed, all human beings) would have a cognitive bias *in favor* of belief in God, not against it.

It is also worth noting that certain traditional explanations are not open to the natural theologian (qua natural theologian) without heavy qualification. For example, if a natural theologian appeals to the noetic effects of sin in order to explain why some putatively sound argument is not widely regarded as persuasive, then he must also be prepared to explain how, given the noetic effects of sin, he himself was able to recognize the soundness of the argument. For if he needed a special infusion of grace or deep catechesis from the Christian community in order to recognize the soundness of his own argument, then he must expect that others will need similar aids, a result that seems to undercut his belief that natural theology is a worthwhile endeavor. We might proceed similarly with respect to the doctrine of the hiddenness of God, another traditional explanation for why the arguments of natural theology fail. Presumably, God is hidden from the natural theologian no less than from the skeptic. In general, it seems that the natural theologian cannot regard human sinfulness or divine hiddenness as *essential* cognitive barriers to belief in the existence of God, and so she must regard them as barriers that can be overcome by adroit argument.

To reiterate: the Christian natural theologian cannot affirm that there are barriers that, in principle, prevent the discovery of sound arguments that prove God's existence. Nor can she affirm that there are barriers that, in principle, prevent those arguments from being persuasive (else natural theology would not be worthwhile). So she believes, qua natural theologian, that there are (or can be) sound and persuasive arguments that demonstrate God's existence. But, given that every human being was created by and for God, she ought also to believe that the background conditions for assent to the conclusions of her arguments are more favorable, not less favorable, than the background conditions for assent to other disputed philosophical claims. Thus, the fact that her arguments do not command widespread assent is a real problem for the Christian natural theologian, one that cries out for explanation.

II.

In this section I develop an explanation, drawn from Pascal, for why natural theology so often fails to convince. The explanation that I propose can, I believe, account for the fact that the arguments of natural theology command little assent while nevertheless affirming its value as a worthwhile endeavor. To begin, let us first reformulate our question. Instead of asking why the arguments of natural theology are *unpersuasive*, let us ask instead why belief in God is not *attractive*. Having thus reformulated our question, we may ask another: what makes something, anything, attractive? I intend no sleight of hand here. This move is merely a step up in generality, a move from the more particular to the more general. Persuasiveness is a feature of arguments, but attractiveness is a feature of many things. Perhaps, by moving from talk about persuasiveness to talk about attractiveness, we can learn something about what makes an argument persuasive.

Pascal writes that "there is a certain model of attractiveness and beauty

consisting in a certain relation [rapport] between our nature, weak or strong as it may be, and the thing which pleases us" (585).⁵ It is instructive that Pascal locates the source of attractiveness in the *rapport* between our nature and the particular attractive thing and not in the thing itself. The word "rapport" and its variants appear in some of the key fragments of the *Pensées*.⁶ English editions of the *Pensées* usually translate "rapport" as "relationship" and "*rapporter*" as "to relate," and, indeed, these are the ordinary renderings of these words. The French word "rapport," however, has valences not quite captured by the English word "relationship." Whereas "relationship" is a neutral term, "rapport" connotes value. This was also true in Pascal's time: the relevant sub-section of one 17th century French dictionary begins its definition of "rapport" with "*convenance*," (fitness/propriety/seemliness) and continues with "*resemblance*" and "*conformité*" (resemblance and conformity).⁷ To say, for example, that there is "a rapport between man and all he knows" (199) is to say more than that some relationship obtains between the two. It is to say that the relationship that obtains is appropriate and that a man's knowledge befits his state as a finite human being. Similarly, it is not the case that there is no "relationship" between God and the human being (418). There is, Pascal would certainly affirm, at the minimum the relationship of creator to creature. But, despite this relationship, the human being is not conformed to God, does not resemble God, and is not fitted to matters divine. We have no rapport with God.

The notion of rapport is of special importance to the task of natural theology. Adherents of natural theology typically try to offer arguments that God's existence is necessary, probable, or rationally affirmed. Pascal's great insight is that such arguments fail to address the deeper problem that is at the root of our unbelief. That deeper problem is the failure to find truths about God attractive, which is in turn rooted in our lack of *rapport* with God. The unbeliever does not find belief in God attractive because he has no way, given God's sheer difference, to relate the attractions of theistic belief to the attractions that he already accepts. On this understanding, the problem with natural theology is not that it is idolatrous or unsound, but that its conclusions are not attractive and are thus incapable of inciting belief. In other words, the failure of natural theology is not a failure of reason, but a failure to be moved by reason. Pascal's comment in fragment 190 is instructive: "The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake." Note that Pascal does not say that the proofs are false, and note that he assumes that it is possible that they could help some people. The problem is not with their soundness, but with the fact that their form (logical argumentation) is not suited to their content (truths about God) and thus can incite belief only for a short time, if at all.

The arguments of natural theology are unpersuasive because belief in God is unattractive. In a shorter work called *The Art of Persuasion*, Pascal makes explicit the link between persuasiveness, attractiveness and rapport. He writes that when we wish to persuade someone of something:

we must take into consideration the person with whom we are concerned, of whom we know the mind and heart, the principles admitted, and the things loved; and then we must take note, in the matter concerned, the rapport it has with admitted truths or of the objects of delight through the charms we attribute to them.⁸

This passage, along with fragment 585 (above) suggests that, according to Pascal, we are likely to regard a potential belief as attractive when we perceive the appropriate rapport between ourselves as knowing subjects, our existing beliefs, and the potential belief in question. In other words, we are likely to be attracted to beliefs that fit in with, resemble, and conform to those beliefs we already have. We judge a potential belief attractive when it can be integrated easily into the structure of our already-held beliefs. Moreover, the perception of *rapport* – which we may here take as the perception that a potential belief is easily integrated – produces a feeling of pleasure. This feeling of pleasure is the pleasure one feels in having the way one looks at the world validated. If I perceive a rapport between a potential belief and my existing belief structure I experience a concomitant feeling of pleasure because every new belief successfully integrated into my structure ratifies the soundness of the structure as a whole and in so doing, ratifies me as a cognitive being. This cannot but be pleasurable. It follows, however, that belief formation is frequently a self-referential process and that we often engage with reality by determining the degree to which it conforms with what we already believe.

III.

This analysis of rapport suggests that if we want to make an argument persuasive, we should try to make the potential belief that is its conclusion attractive. As we seek to understand what makes a potential belief attractive, it is useful to contrast the true but unpersuasive arguments of natural theology to the beguiling but false products of the imagination. Pascal famously calls the imagination “the dominant faculty in man” and writes that “reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common” (44). He offers the following example: “Put the world’s greatest philosopher on a plank that is wider than need be: if there is a precipice below, although his reason may convince him that he is safe, his imagination will prevail” (44). Elsewhere he writes that “Imagination magnifies small objects with fantastic exaggeration until they fill our soul, and with bold insolence cuts down great things to its own size...” (551). Pascal’s account of the imagination further explains how the conclusions of natural theology can seem unattractive in spite of their truth. One must not fail to note that the philosopher of fragment 44 recognizes the truth of his situation: his reason sees that he is safe, but it is unable to compel him to accept his own safety. Pascal suggests that reason cannot always compel belief because we often shun the sober truths of our reason in favor of the empty forms of our imagination.

We can see the most important manifestation of the imagination’s power, however, when we examine its role in human self-understanding.

According to the previous analysis of rapport, we are attracted to things that fit in with, resemble, and conform to our natures, which is to say that what we find attractive depends on what sorts of creatures we are. On this understanding, if we want to explain why we don't find something (including belief in God) attractive, we should look beyond the thing in question and focus on our nature, "weak or strong as it may be" (585). Two possible avenues open for us at this juncture and we could proceed down either while remaining faithful to the spirit of Pascal. We could take the idea of attractiveness as conformity to our natures in an unsparingly Augustinian sense and analyze our failure to find belief in God attractive in terms of the corruptions and limitations that have wrecked human nature. This avenue leads above all to fragment 308 on the three orders – body, mind, and charity – and the suggestion that the supernatural order of charity, inhabited by saints and oriented toward God, is simply incommensurable with the other two orders. On this avenue, since all reasoning and discourse necessarily remain trapped in the order of the intellect, we must wait for God's grace to carry us across the "infinitely more infinite distance" that separates it from the order of charity. But, for reasons that I have already suggested, this avenue is not open to the natural theologian without heavy qualification. On the other hand, we could recognize that Pascal offers multiple accounts of human nature in the *Pensées*, some of which imply that if we could only learn to see ourselves differently, we could make some progress in setting ourselves aright. It is this second avenue, which seems more fruitful for the project of natural theology, that I will pursue.

This avenue begins with the recognition that if we are attracted to things that fit in with, resemble, and conform to our natures, and if we also have a false understanding of our natures, then we are likely to be attracted to false beliefs, beliefs that reinforce that false understanding. Conversely, we are unlikely to be attracted to beliefs – like the belief in God – that threaten to destabilize our false self-understanding. According to Pascal, such is our situation. Our attraction to the beautiful but empty forms of the imagination has led us to construct a "self" that is a mere figment of the imagination:

We are not satisfied with the life we have in ourselves and our own being. We want to lead an imaginary life in the eyes of others, and so we try to make an impression. We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being, and neglect the real one. And if we are calm, or generous, or loyal, we are anxious to have it known so that we can attach these virtues to our other existence; we prefer to detach them from our real self so as to unite them with the other (806).

It is important to note that Pascal identifies a self that is anterior to the imaginary self (our "real self" and our "own being") and suggests that it constructs the imaginary self deliberately.⁹ But if we create our imaginary selves deliberately, then on some level we must be aware of their falsehood, and so the imaginary self is best seen as the product of self-deception. Fragment 978 also addresses the imaginary self in similar terms:

The nature of self-love and of this human self is to love only self and

consider only self. But what is it to do? It cannot prevent the object of its love from being full of faults and wretchedness... it wants to be perfect and sees that it is full of imperfections... it conceives a deadly hatred for the truth which rebukes it and convinces it of its faults. It would like to do away with this truth, and not being able to destroy it as such, it destroys it, as best it can, in the consciousness of itself and others...

The self tries to divert attention from its flaws by constructing "in the consciousness of itself and others" an imaginary self, as described in 806. Yet here again the imaginary self does not completely obscure our knowledge of our true selves. The self "sees that it is full of imperfections" and it destroys the truth about its real being not completely, but only "as best it can." The imaginary self is best understood as a product of self-deception, but the very idea of self-deception implies that there is a part of the self that is not deceived, a part that still recognizes the truth.¹⁰

Two consequences for natural theology follow from this analysis of attractiveness, rapport, and the imaginary self. First, we may conclude that a false understanding of the human self underlies natural theology's failure to convince. We have a false understanding of our natures and this false understanding causes us to be attracted to things that fit in with, resemble, and conform to our (imaginary) natures. Conversely, we are not attracted to beliefs that threaten to undermine our false self-understandings. Belief in God is just such a belief, one that has the power to undermine drastically the beliefs that support our imaginary self-understandings. No one really wants this conceptual carnage and so we turn away from belief in God, which implies that we also turn away from natural theology's sound reasoning about God's existence. Second, because our attraction to our imaginary selves does not completely efface our knowledge of our true selves, we can be made to recognize them. These two conclusions suggest that if a sound argument of natural theology is to claim the persuasiveness that it deserves, then it must go hand in hand with an attack on our false self-understandings. An attack on our false self-understandings can pave the way for a recognition of our true selves, which do share rapport with God, and the recognition that we can (and do) share rapport with God is the first step in making belief in God seem attractive.

In summary, Pascal criticizes traditional arguments for God's existence on the grounds that they are too remote from human experience and, hence, unattractive. At the same time, he also criticizes the imagination for its deceptive attractiveness. He also argues that our false self-understandings lead us to reject the possibility of rapport with God, which works against any effort to make belief in God attractive. This dynamic, in turn, makes the arguments of natural theology unpersuasive. Although Pascal sets the unattractive conclusions of natural theology against the attractive products of the imagination, the rich imagery of the *Pensées* and the skill with which Pascal uses it for his own apologetic task suggests that we would do well to regard natural theology and the imagination as complements rather than contraries. Even if the imagination can make the conclusions of our reason less attractive, it cannot overthrow our faculties of reason altogether. This

fact should lead us to search for ways to use and direct the imagination appropriately and not merely to bewail its power for ill.

IV.

We are at last in a position to chart a new and, hopefully, more successful course for natural theology. Successful argumentation in natural theology would recognize that a false understanding of the human self is what makes the arguments of natural theology seem unattractive and unpersuasive and so it would first attack that false self-understanding. It would thereby be attentive to the dynamics of rapport, which means that it would seek to render belief in God attractive by trying to show how rapport with God is not only possible but already actual. It would also harness the attractive forms produced by the imagination to natural theology's own true claims. It would thus proceed with attention to rhetorical form as well as to philosophical rigor. What might such argumentation look like? Not surprisingly, we have no better example than that provided by Pascal.

Whatever else natural theology may be, its tangible product, its end-result, is a piece of discourse—a piece of discourse that aims to persuade. As such, it is answerable to the standards of rhetoric and literary aesthetics. Consequently, when we evaluate an example of natural theology, we should pay close attention to its literary form and ask ourselves whether that form is appropriate, given its rhetorical aim – persuading someone that God exists. It may well be that the typical form of natural theology, inductive or deductive argumentation embedded in an academic paper, is frequently not the best one. Indeed, we natural theologians should have learned this lesson from one of our greatest opponents. It is surely no accident that perhaps the most devastating critique of natural theology is not presented as a treatise but as a dialogue, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. If I am correct that the deductive argument is not always the best literary form for persuading someone that God exists, then natural theologians should be open to the idea of using other literary forms. To that end, I nominate the form of the fragment, a literary form that may seem scandalously unphilosophical, but one that Pascal and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, used to great effect.

It is likely that the fragmentary character of the collection we call the *Pensées* is merely an accident of its unfinished status. Nevertheless, the form of the text we have is not without significance. There are, after all, other ways of composing a text than by jotting down a thousand disjointed thoughts on scraps of paper and imposing rudimentary classifications on only a few of them. That Pascal was composing his text in this way, in this form, entitles us to comment upon his choice. And, without question, the form of the fragment – the form without apparent form – is uniquely suited to Pascal's rhetorical purposes.

The fragment is essentially open in a way that other literary styles are not.¹¹ The demand for form is the demand for limits and boundaries, and a fragmentary text, to a greater degree than any other kind of text, reveals the possibility of meaning that is not captured by expected forms. The fragment challenges the fixedness of all classification schemes and bound-

aries, including the boundaries separating truth from falsehood. Deductive reasoning neatly divides reality into categories and necessarily culminates in final conclusions, and even dialectic tends toward a resolution of the tensions it creates. But the fragment, unlike deductive or dialectical reasoning, fully embraces the emergence of seemingly contradictory truths. In so doing, it unsettles our reason and our fixed perspectives on reality. This unsettling is perhaps a necessary precursor to the forging of radically new perspectives and beliefs like the belief in God. As we read a series of fragments like those of the *Pensées*, we are constantly forced to shift from one perspective to another in a way that leads us to see that reality is not exhausted by our own interpretations of it. Once we have recognized this fact, we are far more open to affirming ideas that we previously would have scorned. I should be clear that I don't affirm, and I don't think that Pascal would affirm, that there really *are* absolutely contradictory truths. I am merely pointing out that the fragment, as a literary device that presents contradictions without resolving them, can lead us to be more open to the possibility that we have not been seeing the world correctly, surely a key step in any effort to persuade someone to adopt a belief to which he is not already inclined.

Moreover, the reading of fragmentary texts can be an aesthetic experience characterized by sparks of insight and feelings of pleasure. These feelings of pleasure allow the fragment to present in an attractive form (a form that appears uncreated, but is in fact highly artful) content that would otherwise be rejected as alien. Consider fragment 210: "All men naturally hate each other. We have used concupiscence as best we can to make it serve the common good, but this is a mere sham and a false image of charity, for essentially it is just hate." I certainly disagree with the bald assertions that all men hate each other and the common good is a sham, but when I read these two sentences I cannot help feeling intrigued and wondering what Pascal means. In so wondering, I entertain the possibility of their truth and grant them a kind of surface plausibility that I might not have granted them if they were presented as parts of a deductive argument. When a reader reads a fragmentary text, she is captured by the aesthetic experience of the fragment. The fragment is able to bypasses our entrenched defenses and elicit rapport directly. It is therefore the literary form ideally suited to helping the reader entertain the possibility of rapport with God.

V.

We can see the power of the fragmentary form at work in natural theology when we examine the famous wager fragment as an example of artful and persuasive rhetoric, and not just as an example of probabilistic reasoning. As discussed above, Pascal criticizes traditional arguments for God's existence on the grounds that they are too remote from human experience and, hence, unattractive. At the same time, he criticizes the imagination for its often deceptive attractiveness. An ideal apologetic argument, therefore, would be one that harnesses the attractive forms produced by the imagination to the true claims of natural theology. Pascal presents just such an argument in fragment 418, the wager fragment, entitled "*Infini-Rien*" (infinity-nothing).

The literary character of the wager fragment is often overlooked. Indeed, it is instructive to compare the style of this fragment with that of most commentaries on it. With its dialogic structure and its explicit appeals to the imagination, the wager fragment is a work of art that displays real dramatic tension. It is comprised of such elegantly written passages as: "At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong..." A great deal of the philosophical commentary on the wager, by contrast, looks like this: "Suppose there is a matrix in which the betting options are Y and $-Y$ (where Y is some being P_n exists and $-Y$ is P_n does not exist) ..." ¹² Whatever the interest of such treatments, it seems fair to say that they neglect some important literary nuances of Pascal's text, nuances that (I suggest) are important to his argument. I cannot provide a comprehensive treatment of the literary, philosophical, and theological themes of fragment 418 here. ¹³ I can offer a brief analysis of certain overlooked aspects of it, aspects that underscore what I take to be its rhetorical goal: the fusion of natural theology and the imagination through the presentation of a drama of self-erasure.

First, it is important to notice that the whole fragment is presented as a debate about the conditions of rapport. This is especially clear in the beginning. The fragment opens with an unbeliever asserting that we are essentially bodies, bound by "number, time, dimensions," and that therefore we can know finite things alone. ¹⁴ The Christian immediately challenges this view: it cannot be the case that physical form determines what we are able to know because we are able to know the existence of the infinite. The unbeliever rejoins: we are able to know the existence of the infinite because it, like us, has extension, although without limits. But since God has neither extension nor limits, he continues, we cannot know the existence of God. At this point in the debate, the cognitive barrier between human beings and God lies in the fact that we, unlike God, "have extension." The unbeliever agrees that we can conceptualize limitlessness but only limitless extension. The Christian must undermine this idea if the unbeliever is to believe that God exists. ¹⁵

Second, the way he undermines it is little noted: the Christian undermines the unbeliever's concept of the self. If the self is without extension, then it can share rapport with a God without extension. The probabilistic sections of fragment 418 – regardless of their mathematical merits – deploy subtle linguistic tricks with the word "infinite" in order to undermine the unbeliever's preconception that the self is bound by the body's external form. The wager, as discussed, is set in a context that questions how infinity is intelligible. Recall that the unbeliever initially identifies the self with "number, time, dimensions" and suggests that these qualities determine intelligibility. The Christian takes notions of infinity based on these concepts and subtly leads the unbeliever toward a concept of infinity that he previously had not endorsed, that of infinite happiness. First, he takes the concept of infinite number, a concept the unbeliever accepts, and innocently slides from "an infinite number of chances" to "an infinity of infinitely happy life." The unbeliever doesn't object to this move. But what kind of being understands what "an infinity of infinitely happy life" is? Not one

that is strictly limited to rapport with things characterized by number, time, and dimension. Similarly, the Christian uses the phrase "infinite distance," another concept affirmed by the unbeliever, several times in quick succession before concluding with the phrase "infinite prize."¹⁶ But if the unbeliever can understand an infinite prize, especially if that infinite prize is an infinity of infinitely happy life, then he must be able to understand God, who is elsewhere identified with happiness (407). But if he can understand this concept of God, then he himself must not be the sort of being that he once thought. The probabilistic sections of fragment 418 do not convert the unbeliever, but demonstrate to him that the barriers to his belief come from his mistaken conceptions of the self. The unbeliever is so attached to "noxious pleasure, glory, and good living" that he identifies his true self with the body and then falsely concludes that his bodily existence makes God unintelligible to him.

Third, if we pay close attention to Pascal's use of pronouns it becomes even more clear that the wager fragment recounts the drama of the erasure of the false self and its replacement with the true self. From the end of the preamble on rapport, when the dialogic structure of the fragment begins in earnest until his conversion, the unbeliever, and only the unbeliever, speaks with the pronoun "I." Moreover, every statement after he is asked, "how will you wager?" contains the word "I." Only after the unbeliever's conversion does the Christian begin using the first person pronoun, whereas the unbeliever suddenly does not. Instead, curiously enough, the unbeliever exclaims, "*Ô! ce discours me transporte, me ravit!*" Krailsheimer translates this sentence as "How these words fill me with rapture and delight," but they are equally rendered "Oh, how this discourse transports me and carries me off!" I suggest that Pascal deliberately puts in play both meanings of *transporter* and *ravir* in order to highlight the fact that the unbeliever's "me," his false self, has been spirited away by the power of the Christian's argument.

Though it may seem farfetched, we should take seriously the idea that Pascal used pronouns with polemical intent in this fragment. According to Pascal's contemporaries, he was keenly aware of his own use of first-person pronouns, and he regarded the words "I" and "me" as antithetical to piety and civility.¹⁷ In this fragment, the false self of the unbeliever has been carried away and the Christian now feels free to say "I" because, according to Pascal, only the Christian is entitled to say "I"—the "I" of the true self, the self that, as the Christian says at the end of fragment 418, "submits its being" to God. This use of *être* in the Christian's concluding statement recalls the self's "real being" (*être véritable*) discussed in fragment 806. It also invites a richer interpretation of the Christian's preceding statement, "you will have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing."¹⁸ In truth, the unbeliever has paid with his false self, but that is indeed "nothing."

Finally, we must note that the real target of Pascal's verbal machinations is not some fictional unbeliever, but the living person who reads his text. When we bear this fact in mind, we can see in fragment 418 the full force of Pascal's ability to impress literary artfulness into the service of natural theology. By the very act of reading the fragment, we must first identify with the

unbeliever: as we read, we speak his "I" with our inner voices and we are addressed directly by the Christian as "you." As the Christian "I" replaces the unbeliever's "I," we, continuing to read, cannot help but participate in this move. By the time he puts the words "*Ô! ce discours me transporte, me ravit!*" in our own mouths, Pascal has carried us a long way down a path we didn't even know we were on, the path to rapport with God.

The wager fragment is a good example of the direction that natural theology should take if it is to claim the esteem that rightfully belongs to it. It begins with an attack on our false self-understandings, which paves the way for the recognition that rapport with God is possible. It impresses the power of the imagination into the service of the true claims of natural theology. In the wager fragment as elsewhere, Pascal presents philosophical arguments as aesthetic artifacts. We would do well to imitate him and deploy a splendid variety of literary forms in our arguments. If we do not, the prospects for natural theology will remain grim. It will inevitably step into the breach with a whisper instead of a shout, bearing a defaced reason as its only standard.

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NOTES

1. Although the project of natural theology may not assume any specifically Christian commitments, it is Christian natural theologians with whom I am primarily concerned in this essay. I suspect, however, that my argument applies equally to natural theologians of other monotheistic faiths.

2. If the phrase "the existence of God" raises too many onto-theological hackles, the reader may feel free to substitute, e.g., "the reality of God." Similarly, when I speak of "demonstrating the existence of God," I intend this phrase to cover inductive as well as deductive arguments.

3. See, e.g., Terence D. Cuneo "Combating the Noetic Effects of Sin: Pascal's Strategy for Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), pp. 645-662 and Daniel C. Fouke, "Argument in Pascal's *Pensées*," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 6 (1989) 57-68.

4. I should be clear that I have in mind robust arguments offered in good faith, not pseudo-arguments like "If $7+5=12$ then God exists..."

5. All citations given in the text in parentheses are from Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), which uses the Lafuma numbering scheme. As much as possible, however, I leave the word "rapport" untranslated.

6. For example, 199, 298, 308, 418, 733, 826, 919.

7. Academie Francaise. *Le dictionnaire de l'Academie françoise*. Paris: 1694, p. 281.

8. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi, (Oxford World's Classics. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 195.

9. That, I take it, is the force of all the active verbs he uses in 806 ("we are not satisfied... we want... we try... we strive... we are anxious... we prefer").

10. Of course, "the very idea of self-deception" is itself disputed by contemporary philosophers. My argument here depends not on some particular account of self-deception but on the idea that we can be led to recognize the truth about ourselves.

11. Much of what follows is a distillation of lectures on the fragment given by David Tracy from 1999-2001 at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

12. Jeff Jordan, "The Many God's Objection," in Jeff Jordan, ed. *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD.: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), p. 104. I am being grossly unfair to Jordan, of course. The question of whether there are probabilistic arguments in favor of religious belief is a perfectly appropriate one. I merely wish to emphasize that there is more to fragment 418 than betting matrices.

13. The best literary analysis of the wager fragment that I have found is Bernard Howells, "The Interpretation of Pascal's 'Pari'," *The Modern Language Review*, 79 (1984), pp. 45-63.

14. The wager fragment certainly turns into a dialogue between an unbeliever and a Christian, but it is difficult to say whether the fragment's opening section should also be understood as a dialogue. I believe that it should but my reading does not depend on it. It is certainly the case that the opening section presents representative skeptical and Christian lines of argument.

15. Most commentators claim that it is the rationality of believing in God, rather than the existence of God per se, that is at stake in the wager. I myself am not convinced that it makes sense to separate these questions, but in any case, the proposition that the wager concerns is: "Let us say, 'either God is, or he is not.'"

16. I note for the record that these movements are found also in the original French, not just in translation.

17. Antoine Arnauld, in the *Port-Royal Logic*, writes: "Pascal, who knew as much of genuine rhetoric as did any man... maintained that a well-bred man ought to avoid mentioning himself even to the point of avoiding the words 'I' and 'me.' He was accustomed to saying that Christian piety annihilated the 'I', while human civility concealed and suppressed the 'me.'" *The Art of Thinking or The Port Royal Logic*, section 20.6. In the spirit of fairness, however, I should also note that the *Pensées* contain no fewer than 753 occurrences of *je* or *j'* and 99 of *moi*, according to Hugh M. Davidson and Pierre H. Dubé, *A Concordance to Pascal's Pensées* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

18. The verb is *donner*, not *payer*—literally, "you have given nothing" (*vous n'avez rien donné*). There is a significant difference between understanding this conclusion in terms of the language of gift instead of the language of payment.

19. I would like to thank Franklin Gamwell, Karin Meyers, Richard Rosengarten, Lea Schweitz, Kathryn Tanner, and David Tracy for their comments on a previous version of this paper.